

Spain

The Sisters arrived in Spain in 1860 and their first school was established in Barcelona. Other schools followed and today Sisters work both in the schools and outside, involved in a variety of pastoral outreach activities. Communities are located in Madrid, El Ejido- Almeria, Bellvitge, Barcelona, Burgos, Bembibre (Leon), Las Ventas de Albares (Leon), Fonsagrada (Lugo), and San Sebastian.

The first community in another European country to develop in the Institute was Spain.

During the Civil War that ravaged Spain from 1835 to 1841, many families sought asylum in France. Among them were Señora de Argila and her two daughters. They were welcomed in Béziers by the community there and the two girls became pupils in the boarding school. Later one of these girls, Teresa, joined the Institute and was professed as Sr Leocadie in Paris in 1845. She and her family constantly begged Mother de Fautoas to send sisters to Spain.

At first, it did not seem to be what God wanted for them. There were already other congregations in Spain, though these were enclosed religious. Besides, the political climate was not favourable. Finally, towards the end of 1857, the persevering Señora de Argila went to consult the Curé of Ars. He encouraged her not to give up, saying that the Infant Jesus wanted a house of his Institute in Barcelona. He added: "This foundation will meet with contradictions as do all God's works but the Will of God will be made manifest". Mother de Fautoas could no longer resist and, in September 1860, Mother Aloysia Millet was sent to Barcelona to look into the possibility of opening a school. On her return she gave a positive report and the first group of sisters prepared to go to Spain. Sr Henri d'Andoque took charge of the new mission, together with three others, Sr Leocadie de Argila, Sr Maurice and Sr Luce. Accompanied by Mother de Fautoas and Sr Aloysia they arrived in Barcelona on December 12, 1860, at 8.00am. Meanwhile Señora de Argila was busy arranging a meeting with the Archbishop, Monsignor Palau.

When the sisters arrived in St Anne's parish they were informed that a letter had been sent to France explaining that there were some difficulties about their coming to Spain. Had they received this news earlier they would not have made the journey. However, seeing the hand of Providence in this, the Bishop invited them to stay and open a school. Such are God's mysterious ways.

In 1864 the sisters wanted to open another house in Zaragoza in answer to requests for a boarding school there. However, the Archbishop there requested to see the Constitutions approved by the Holy See. They had none!

We interrupt our story here to see how they dealt with this situation.

Approbation of the Institute by the Holy See – 1866

As Nicolas Barré, in the 17th century, had set up communities without vows and without cloister in order to free the first sisters to go among the people and teach, now, Mother de Fautoas saw the necessity of seeking papal approval for the Institute so that its mission could continue and spread. She set out for Rome, where she stayed from May 31 to December 13, 1866. She did not achieve her goal without many difficulties. She was granted three audiences with Pius IX. Finally, on hearing that the Institute had remained faithful to its original spirit and inspiration without vows or cloister, the Holy Father granted the approbation saying: "An Institute that has stood on its own feet for 200 years deserves something better than a laudatory approval... and you shall have it".

On November 21, 1866, Mother de Fautoas received the Apostolic Brief definitively approving the Institute. By this brief, vows were permitted to those already in the Institute and became the norm for those who joined from then on. This involved the revision of the Constitutions based on directives from Rome. The new Constitutions were approved on June 29, 1872, ad experimentum, and finally approved in 1887.

Mother de Fautoas presented the new Constitutions to the Institute, saying: “It is the Love of God, which for two centuries took the place of vows for us. Today, may it also be the Love of God that helps us to put into practice what we have solemnly promised”. The superiors who were present at the Chapter in Paris on December 3, 1872, professed the first perpetual vows in the Institute.

The way was clear for the Institute to carry on its mission in Spain. Providing this seemingly simple requirement was to have far-reaching effects on the whole Institute. It gradually led to a more conventual form of life, such as was common to women religious at the time. However, the spirit lived on.

The sisters continued their mission with the same daring and love, answering the call of God and responding to the needs of the times and places in which they lived.

The turning point in the story of the Spanish province stems from the impact of Vatican II on the Church. The sisters’ lives and pastoral ministries took on a different focus from that time. However, initially no one could have imagined the extent of change that would take place.

In 1966, the first group of sisters who wished to follow the original inspiration of the Institute moved to a disadvantaged area in Buen Pastor, Barcelona, where they worked alongside the Marist Brothers. Here they desired to live out the spirit of the Institute in a different way, in what had previously been an unknown area for them.

In 1970, another group moved to a similar area in Bellvitge, Barcelona. This area had a high percentage of immigrants, for whom many problems arose owing to difficulties in integration.

In 1974, in Madrid, some sisters left the school of Eduardo Dato and moved out to the margins in Vallecas, which at the time was one of the biggest shantytowns in Madrid. They sought to reach out to these people in whatever way they could. This also became the location for the novitiate, with the newer members beginning their formation in the midst of this reality.

The sisters who moved out of our own schools had to do some further studies to pass the state exams necessary to teach in government schools. They saw this as a means of offering a prophetic presence in the state sector, where they were very much with the local people. At the same time, the older sisters, who had initially remained in our big schools, were invited to move out to more suitable accommodation. Some houses suitable for retirement were prepared. The more active sisters moved from the school buildings to places where they could be closer to people. This proved to be a difficult transition for some as they sought to adapt to simpler living conditions in other environments. However, in a spirit of faith they accepted, realising that they were being invited to renew the giving of their lives to God, as they had been taught in their early days.

Gradually they adjusted and soon it became quite natural to be among the people in parishes, involved in catechesis and other forms of evangelisation, including much

pastoral work with young people. Two sisters worked in a school for gypsies in Barcelona, at a time when it was not possible for them to be in a regular school. Gradually our big communities were replaced by a number of smaller communities, which enabled greater sharing of life, prayer and pastoral activities with lay people. Sisters commuted to the schools and continued teaching there. But as time went on, some moved out of teaching to other areas of pastoral need, such as prisons, soup kitchens, caring for abandoned children and Caritas groups. Living in smaller communities also gave the sisters more freedom to move on to another geographical area if and when it was felt to be appropriate.

In the meantime in our schools, there is a growing awareness that lay people are not there just to be employed by us, but that we are all working in partnership, and hence responsibilities are shared.

Given the Church and State relationship in the country, a sister is still head of every school. Reflection continues on other possible ways forward. All the evolution that has taken place over the years has involved much struggle and misunderstandings. Letting go of much loved establishments has brought sadness and challenge, while seeking to trust in God's providential guidance through all the difficulties.

In 1993, sisters moved to two more remote areas in the country, Almería and Galicia. El Ejido in Almería is an area that has attracted large numbers of immigrants, mainly Moroccans, as well as many local people from the smaller villages around. All of these people came to work in the immense greenhouses set up in the area. As they never had money and now earn it almost overnight, they face many consequent problems. There is a large number of gypsies in the area also, who live in rather difficult circumstances, which makes integration with the people as a whole very difficult.

In Fonsagrada, Galicia, the main problems are associated with extreme isolation in a mountainous area, where the climate can sometimes be quite severe. The remoteness does not offer a future for the younger generations and hence older people tend to be more isolated. In both places, the sisters teach in state schools and do various forms of pastoral work.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the search continues to find ways of being true to the spirit of creativity and daring that has characterised the history of our Institute. We trust that our way of being present and being involved with others may reflect the Gospel spirit, and the story that began in 1662 with a group of courageous women who said 'yes' to the realities of their time. So the sisters in Spain continue to dedicate themselves with energy and enthusiasm to their mission, always ready to go further.